

Michael McDowell

Scavenger

Seaview, Washington

Beyond white lines of breaking waves
two fishing boats ply the green waters.
Walking the tideline I stoop and pluck from the sand
plastics: bottles and lids, yogurt cups and plant pots.

Into the trash bag hanging by its drawstring from my shoulder I stuff
twist-top caps, splayed ends of fireworks, polypropylene rope.
Within minutes the bag bulges from my torso like a tumor.
In goes garden netting, a toothbrush, a side of a plastic crate.

Like a scrub jay attracted to things bright and shiny
my gloved hand aims for tiny glints of red and turquoise and orange,
the brittle, broken bits of some long-afloat larger plastic thing,
each sun-beaten piece as forlorn as a lost earring.

On this large serving tray of gray sand
I pass up the salads of seaweed, kelp, and eel grass
and the remains of crabs and and clams left by gulls.
I choose the ocean's growing embarrassment of inedibles:

A cigarette lighter that gulls mistake for squid,
Styrofoam bits that plovers mistake for fish eggs,
plastic bags that can fill a pelican's gullet,
fishing line that could noose a cormorant's head.